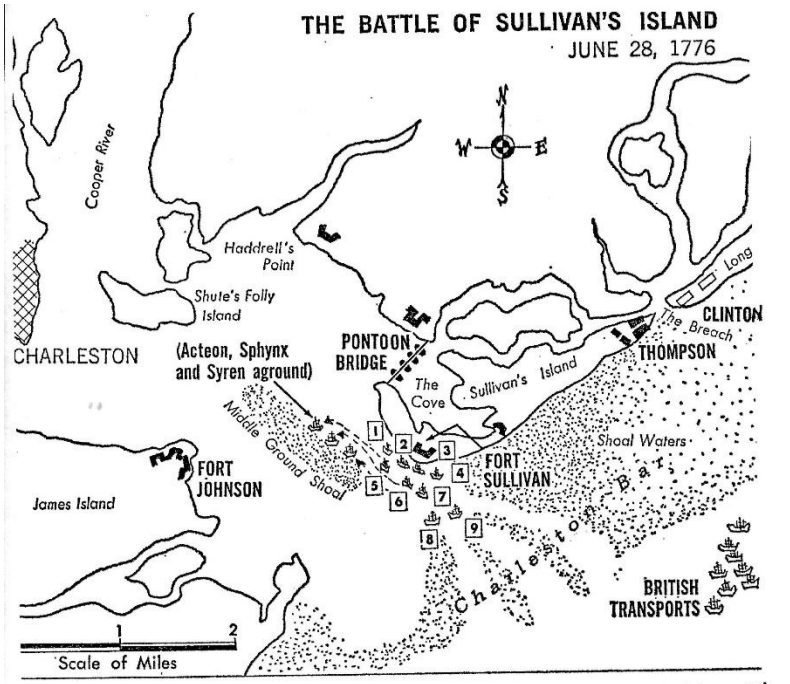
The Commanders and Chaplains of the American Revolution

Part Twelve: Let the Guns Best Served Decide!

The Battle of Sullivan's Island

In order to interrupt trade and support for the American Rebellion from Charleston, Sir Henry Clinton and Sir Peter Parker needed to block the harbor. To do that, they would need to seize and occupy the small fort on Sullivan's Island. Accordingly on the 28th of June 1776 they began their two-pronged attack. Since Sullivan's Island was defended, seven regiments of British infantry would be landed by long boat on Long Island and then wade across shallow water to scatter the rebels on Sullivan's Island.[1] At the same time Sir Peter Parker's ships-of-the line, with their massive naval guns, would reduce the fort to splinters.

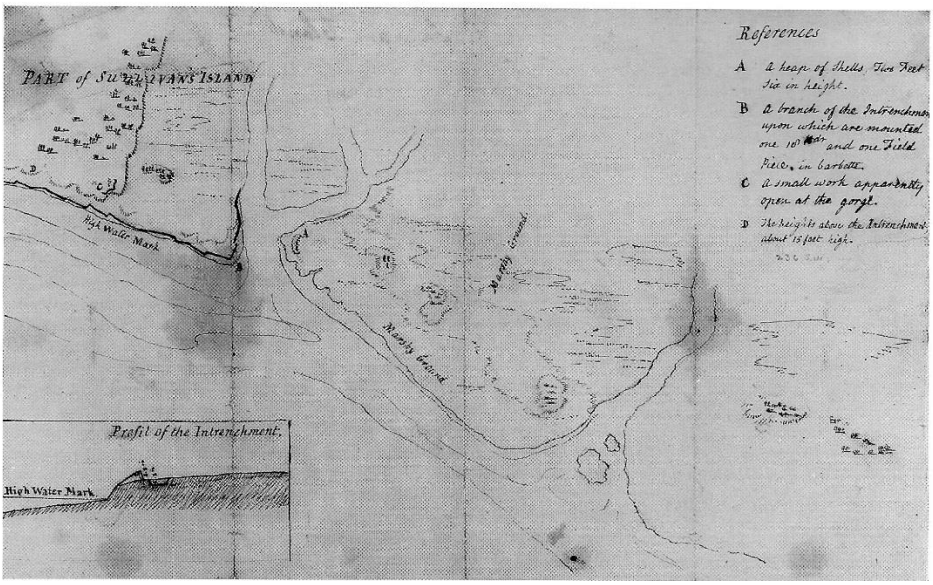


[1] Terry W. Lipscomb, Terry W. Lipscomb, *The Carolina Low Country and the Battle of Fort Moultrie* (Columbia, SC: South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1994) p. 48 n. 36.

The Breach Inlet

At the eastern end of Sullivan's island, the Breach Inlet separated Sullivan's Island from Long Island.[2] In 1776 the width of the Inlet was perhaps a half a mile. Sir Henry Clinton and Lord Charles Cornwallis planned to have the infantry wade across the Inlet while a few of Sir Peter Parker's frigates placed artillery fire on the patriot position opposite. The depth was supposed to be no more than three feet at low tide, but that was not true. The depth was about seven feet which made wading across in full packs impossible.

Clinton's next option was to load the troops in longboats and row them across. This proved deadly when sandbars forced the boats into a single line. They were perfect targets for the two patriot cannon firing grape shot and the entrenched sharpshooters picking off the rowers. Moreover, low tide made the navy gunships standoff lest they be grounded in the sand.



Drawing by Capt. Lt. Abraham d' Aubant, Royal Engineers

Patriot defenses on Sullivan's Island 500 yards from the waterline

The responsibility for the defense of the Breach Inlet fell on Colonel William Thomson of the Orangeburg Militia and commander of the 3rd South Carolina Rangers. Three hundred riflemen from Thomson's regiment, 200 North Carolina Continentals, 200 South Carolina militia, 50 soldiers of Captain John Allston's Raccoon Company, and

[2] Long Island is now The Isle of Palms.

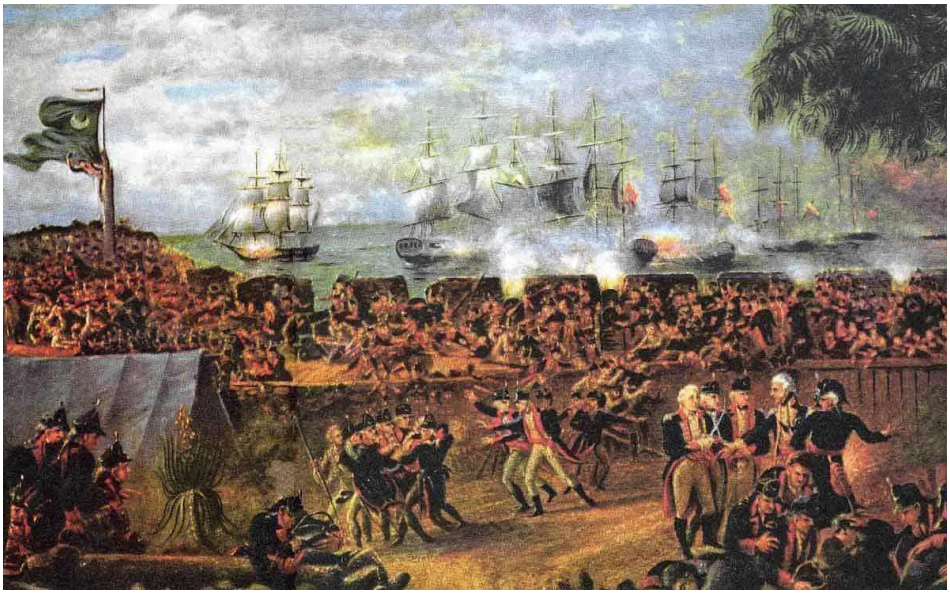
a band of Catawba Indians made up the initial patriot infantry. To these 750 rifles and muskets were added three pieces of artillery and a small crew of artillerymen.[3]

Even though their three brigades of redcoats outnumbered the patriots by more than three to one, Clinton and Cornwallis had serious problems. They had just enough longboats to send 600 troops at a time through a narrow channel that forced the boats to advance in single file. This would provide the patriot artillery perfect enfilade fire down the British line long before the first boat made it across—if it ever did.

But Clinton thought he would at least have a go. The mortar boats fired a few shells at the entrenched Americans and then the British grenadiers, light infantry and the 15th Regiment got into their flat-bottom boats. The first two boats ran aground in the middle of the Inlet and were greeted with grape shot and rifle fire. The flotilla turned backward in disarray. Clinton studied the American position with his spyglass and multiplied Thomson's 750 troops in his imagination to at least three thousand. He surmised that his first wave (and each following wave) would be outnumbered four to one. It was a suicide mission. Clinton withdrew his soldiers deeper into Long Island and left them there swatting mosquitos.

At about five o'clock in the afternoon the patriots were reinforced by 700 Virginia Continentals under the command of the Rev. (Colonel) Peter Muhlenberg. The security of the forts rear was secured.[4]

The Palmetto Fort



Preservation Society of Charleston: The Halsey Map: Battle of Sullivan's Island

[3] Terry W. Lipscomb, Op.cit., p.37. The Rangers were a mounted regiment—on horses.
[4] Ibid., p.39.

At approximately eight o'clock on the morning of June 28th, the British sloop, *Thunder*, began throwing mortar shells into the fort from a distance of 2,600 yards.[5] Due to the rocking action of the ocean waves, the ship's platform was bobbing such that the shells either hit the beach or flew over the fort. One shell hit in a swampy pond in the middle of the fort and killed three ducks, two geese, and one turkey.[6] Otherwise, after 60 shells were fired at the fort, only one defender was slightly wounded.

Sir Peter Parker wanted to anchor his ships closer to the fort so that they could fire directly into the fort's embrasures, but his pilot would not risk grounding the ship on the sand bars. One Black pilot, Samson by name, refused repeatedly to move the ships closer to the fort. At least three Black pilots were seized by the British and carried away.[7]

Once the Thunder had finished killing birds, the main British battle fleet, the *Bristol*, the *Experiment*, the *Active*, and the *Solebay* anchored in front of the fort at a range of 400 yards. Their 90 guns, per broadside, fired an "eternal sheet of fire and smoke" for four hours.[8] When Captain Scott of the Experiment trained a spyglass on the fort, he was perplexed to find that the cannonade had done no visible damage. The palmetto wood had absorbed the shot without splintering, and the wall of the fort remained intact.

The return fire from the 4th South Carolina artillery, with about 15 cannon engaged, swept the decks of the British ships, killing or wounding both naval officers and crew. One lucky shot hit the anchor cable of the *Bristol*, Sir Peter Parker's flagship, so that the ship swung with the tide, exposing her aft section to the fort.[9] At that point the fort's artillery could fire into the captain's cabin and down the length of the ship.

The artillery duel between the ships and the fort lasted for 13 hours— with a break on the patriot side to replenish gunpowder and eat lunch. Of the 435 soldiers in the fort, Chaplain Purcell ministered to 25 patriot wounded and said prayers over 12 deceased heroes. Some of the wounded suffered only light strikes-- Lieutenant Henry Gray and Lieutenant Thomas Hall by splinters from wooden pilings. Among the dead was "a mulatto waiting boy belonging to Lieutenant Dunbar."[10]

The British casualties aboard the *Bristol* and the *Experiment*, the 50-gun ships of the line, totaled 63 killed and 127 wounded. Patriot fire either killed or wounded every person stationed on the *Bristol*'s quarterdeck. Among the mortally wounded were John

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[5] Letter of Private Edward Hall, 2nd S.C. Regiment, to his father, Richard J. Hall, as cited in Terry W. Lipscomb, Op.cit. p. 43.
[6] Terry W. Lipscomb, Op.cit., p. 28.
[7] Ibid, p. 50 n.51.
[8] Ibid., p. 29.
[9] Georgia Muldrow Gilmer, "Battle of Fort Sullivan: Events Leading to First Decisive Victory," in *American Revolution Roster, Fort Sullivan 1776-1780* (Charleston, SC: Fort Sullivan Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, 1976), p.58.
[10] Ibid., pp. 69, 164, and 169 .

Morris, Captain of the *Bristol* and Lord William Campbell (who died two years later), the last Royal Governor of South Carolina. Among those who were wounded but survived more than two years were Alexander Scott, Captain of the *Experiment*, and Sir Peter Parker who was wounded by a splinter that tore his breeches off, exposing his rear.

By nine o'clock in the evening, the British squadron had spent most of its ammunition.[11] It was too dark for the gunners to see the fort clearly. Sir Peter Parker, presumably redressed, ordered a withdrawal of the fleet. The British cut their cables and left their anchors behind. [12] It would be almost four years before Charleston became a target for Sir Henry Clinton and Lord Charles Cornwallis again. Under patriot control, the port of Charleston remained open to commercial and military shipping and thus provided a supply line to General Washington's Continental Army.

When the delegates to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia heard of the victory, they were elated. The Declaration of Independence had just been announced, so the victory at Charleston added military to political success. By August 4th the Provincial Government of South Carolina, under the leadership of President John Rutledge, changed the name of Fort Sullivan to Fort Moultrie. The memory of the original palmetto fort was maintained in the symbol of the humble palmetto tree on the South Carolina state flag.

[11] By one estimate, the British fired about 10,000 rounds, at least 8,000 of which overshot the fort.
[12] Terry W. Lipscomb, Op.cit., p. 35.